On Research Center for Scientific Research & Consultations

مركز أون ريسيرش للبحوث العلمية والاستشارات

The Impact of Yemen's 2014 Civil War War on Migration Flows: Regional and Global Implications

Prepared by:

Assia Benalloum* & PR. *Souad Rajeb

Strategic Reports

Dec.2025

الناشر

مركز أون ريسيرش للبحوث العلمية والاستشارات

القاهرة – جمهورية مصر العربية

حقوق النشر والطبع محفوظة

On Research Center for Scientific Research and Consultations

Cairo, Arab Republic of Egypt

Copyright © All rights reserved

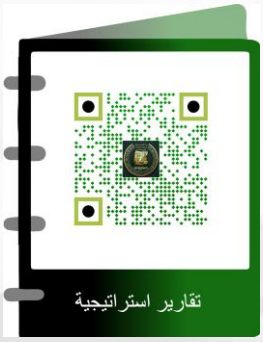
Web: https://onresearch.org/

Email: info@onresearch.org

ديسمبر ٢٠٢٥

تقارير استراتيجية

مركز أون ريسيرش للبحوث العلمية والاستشارات



The Impact of Yemen's 2014 Civil War on Migration Flows: Regional and Global Implications

Prepared by:

Assia Benalloum

researcher and PhD student at the Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences Mohammedia at Hassan II University of Casablanca

Souad Rajeb

university professor at the Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences

Mohammedia at Hassan II University of Casablanca

Morocco

Index

Title	Page number
Abstract	6
Introduction	7
The central research question	8
Methodology	9
Theoretical Framework	10
Key features and classification	10
Defining the Internationalization of Civil Wars	11
International Migration Concepts and analytical framework	14
The 2014 Yemeni Civil War: Causes, Actors, and Regional Dynamics	16
Structural Domestic Factors Underpinning the 2014 Geopolitical Crisis	16
The six wars between the Houthis and Saleh's Government (2004-2010)	17
The security vacuum created by the 2011 Arab Spring	17
Limits and collapse of Yemen's Post-2011 transitional framework	18
Internal Stakeholders shaping the 2014 conflict dynamics	19
The Non-State Armed Houthi Group	19
The Southern Secessionist Movement	20
The Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah)	21
Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	21
Regional Influence and intervention in the 2014 civil l war	22
Saudi Arabia's Strategic involvement in the 2014 Yemeni conflict	22
Emirati security and strategic interests in Yemen's 2014 conflict	23
Iran's Role in Shaping the 2014 Yemeni Crisis Dynamics	24
Migration as a consequence of the 2014 Yemeni civil war	25
International emigration as a transnational manifestation of the 2014 Yemeni civil war	26
Internal Displacement Caused by the 2014 Yemeni Civil War	28
Yemen as a Corridor: Transit migration trends and implications	31
What makes the Yemeni refugee distinct? An analytical perspective	35
The absence of a central state and the production of extreme vulnerability	35

Migration toward structurally fragile Host States	**36**
The Yemeni refugee as a matter of international public interest	**38**
Conclusion	**40**

Abstract: International migration has emerged as a critical challenge to regional and global stability, particularly in contexts of armed conflict and state fragmentation. This article examines how the 2014 Yemeni civil war—and its internationalization in 2015—shaped migration dynamics both within Yemen and across the region. Using a qualitative, descriptive-analytical methodology based on secondary sources from international organizations, academic literature, and legal instruments, the study first situates the conflict within the typology of armed wars and the principles of international migration law, then analyzes the internal and regional actors involved, and finally explores the migratory consequences. Findings reveal three key patterns: large-scale international emigration, significant internal displacement, and extensive transit migration through Yemen toward the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. The involvement of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran intensified displacement pressures and reshaped migration corridors. Yemeni refugees face unique vulnerabilities due to state collapse, structurally fragile host countries, and limited international protection, highlighting the tensions between sovereignty, regional security, and global humanitarian obligations.

Keywords: *Yemen, Migration, Civil War, International Law, Political Instability*

الملخص: أصبحت الهجرة الدولية تحديًا رئيسيًا للاستقرار الإقليمي والعالمي، لا سيما في سياقات النزاعات المسلحة وانهيار الدولة. تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تأثير الحرب الأهلية اليمنية عام ٢٠١٤، وتدويلها في ٢٠١٥، على ديناميات الهجرة داخليًا وخارجيًا. باستخدام منهج نوعي وصفي -تحليلي يستند إلى مصادر ثانوية من المنظمات الدولية والأدبيات الأكاديمية والأطر القانونية، تحدد الدراسة أولا النزاع ضمن تصنيف الحروب المسلحة ومبادئ قانون الهجرة الدولي، ثم تحلل الأطراف المحلية والإقليمية المشاركة، وأخيرًا تستعرض آثار الهجرة. تكشف النتائج عن ثلاثة أنماط رئيسية: الهجرة الدولية واسعة النطاق، النزوح الداخلي الكبير، والهجرة العابرة عبر اليمن نحو القرن الأفريقي وشبه الجزيرة العربية. أدى تدخل السعودية والإمارات وإيران إلى زيادة ضغوط النزوح وإعادة تشكيل مسارات الهجرة. يواجه اللاجئون اليمنيون ضعفًا فريدًا نتيجة انهيار الدولة، وضعف دول الاستقبال، والحماية الدولية المحدودة، ما يبرز التوتر بين السيادة الوطنية والأمن الإقليمي والالتزامات الإنسانية العالمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اليمن، الهجرة، الحرب الأهلية، القانون الدولي، عدم الاستقرار السياسي.

Introduction

Migration between regions has been a constant feature throughout human history, reflecting an ancestral nomadic way of life. Humanity's dispersal capacity has played a significant role in our evolutionary history (Miro-Herrans, Al-Meeri and Mulligan 2014). With the transformations of the international order, human migratory dynamics have evolved without ever disappearing. Population movements between states have intensified and become increasingly complex as the international system has evolved. Although migration is as old as humanity itself, it has never been as visible as it is today. It now concerns all states, whether countries of origin, transit, or destination. This renewed visibility calls for a rethinking of international migration law as a comprehensive analytical framework. Indeed, the mobility of people across borders is intrinsically international in nature, as it involves an interaction between the migrant, the state of origin, and the host state (Chetail 2017).

The term *"migrant"* is not defined under international law (International Organization for Migration 2019). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) fills this gap by defining a migrant as any person who moves away from their habitual place of residence, either temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons, within a country or across an international border. This definition encompasses several legally recognized categories, including migrant workers, refugees, asylum seekers, and victims of smuggling or trafficking. Each of these categories is governed by specific international legal instruments, which nevertheless do not restrict state sovereignty. Indeed, states retain their sovereign authority under international law to determine migration policies and control their borders. However, policies concerning individuals present on a state's territory must be guided by three core principles: universality, equality between migrants and citizens in the enjoyment of rights, and protection from forced expulsion to countries where individuals would face "irreparable harm" (Grant 2006).

Migration thus appears as a complex phenomenon that intertwines state sovereignty with expansion within the international system. Consequently, migratory movements are influenced by a wide range of international factors, including economic dynamics, climate change, demographic pressures, and internal conflicts that disrupt the social and political balance of states. An internal conflict, also known as a civil war, has been defined by the Correlates of War Project (COW) as any armed conflict that meets the following criteria: (1) it involves military action within the territory of a member of the international system; (2) the national government is actively engaged; (3) both sides demonstrate effective resistance; and (4) there are at least 1,000 battle-related deaths per year during the conflict. Such internal instability often triggers large migratory waves that affect the international system as a whole, and regional stability in particular.

This study focuses specifically on a unique case of civil war: the 2014 Yemeni Civil War. The distinctiveness of this non-international armed conflict lies in two essential factors. First, the internal political complexity characterized by the multiplicity of actors involved, including the national government, non-state armed groups, and transnational armed organizations. Second, the fragmentation of Yemen's internal political situation became intertwined with the intervention of an international coalition led by Saudi Arabia on 26 March 2015. This date is pivotal in analyzing the 2014 conflict, as it marks the beginning of its internationalization. Before 2015, the conflict actors were primarily domestic, encompassing both state and non-state entities. However, following the coalition's intervention, the legal classification of the conflict shifted: it ceased to be a purely non-international armed conflict and became an internationalized non-international armed conflict according to the typology established by international humanitarian law.

In light of this context, the central research question guiding this study is as follows: **To what extent has the 2014 Yemeni Civil War influenced regional and international migration dynamics?**

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical methodology based on the systematic use of secondary data. The research draws primarily on reports, statistical databases, and situation updates from major international organizations (UNHCR, IOM…), complemented by academic literature on civil wars and conflict internationalization. Yemen is examined as a single case study due to its relevance as a contemporary conflict where state collapse, regional intervention, and large-scale displacement intersect. The temporal scope extends from 2014 to 2023, covering the outbreak of the civil war, its internationalization in 2015, and the evolution of internal displacement, outward migration, and transit movements. Geographically, the analysis encompasses population movements within Yemen, migration toward the Gulf states and the Horn of Africa, and transit routes connecting East Africa, Yemen, and the Arabian Peninsula.

Methodologically, the research follows the same structure as the article and proceeds in three steps. First, the theoretical framework clarifies the concepts of civil war, internationalization, and international migration, providing the analytical tools used throughout the study. Second, the conflict analysis examines the internal causes of the 2014 crisis, the role of domestic actors, and the involvement of regional stakeholders, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran, whose actions contributed to the internationalization of the war. Third, the study assesses the migratory consequences of the conflict through a detailed analysis of international emigration, internal displacement, and transit migration. Quantitative data are harmonized across sources and visualized through figures to enhance clarity despite inconsistencies in humanitarian reporting.

Comparative elements referring to cases such as Syria, Libya, or Somalia are incorporated when relevant, not as a full comparative method, but to contextualize the specificities of Yemeni displacement. The final analytical section interprets how state fragmentation, structurally fragile

host countries, and the limited engagement of the international community combine to shape the distinct vulnerability of Yemeni refugees.

By combining these layers of analysis, the methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of how conflict dynamics, especially state collapse and regional intervention, shape patterns of forced mobility. While the reliance on secondary data allows broad coverage of trends, a key limitation of this method lies in the inconsistencies between available statistical estimates, particularly regarding internal displacement and outward migration.

1. Theoretical Framework

The Yemeni civil war, which erupted in 2014, initially retained a predominantly domestic character (September 2014-March 2015) and was therefore understood as an internal armed conflict. Following its internationalization in March 2015, however, the applicable legal and normative framework shifted toward the rules governing international armed conflict. Parallel to this transformation, migration patterns also evolved, ranging from large-scale internal displacement to increasingly complex forms of regional and international mobility.

In this section, which aims to establish the theoretical foundation of the study, we first examine the conceptual approaches that frame the transition of the Yemeni conflict from a civil war to an internationalized conflict. We then turn to the historical trajectory of migration and explore its contemporary challenges within an increasingly globalized environment.

1.1 Conceptualizing civil war: Key features and classification

Kalyvas (2006) defines civil war as an armed conflict occurring within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity, involving parties that were initially subject to a common authority at the onset of hostilities (Kalyvas 2006). Another definition, proposed by Henderson (1999),

describes civil war as a violent and sustained conflict between a state's military forces and insurgent groups composed primarily of the state's own citizens (Henderdon et Singer 2000).

It is, however, essential to distinguish civil war from other forms of internal conflict. Gurr (1970) considers all collective attacks within a political community directed against the political regime, its actors, including competing political groups, and those responsible for implementing its policies, as manifestations of political violence (Gurr 1970) . This concept is broad, encompassing revolutions, guerrilla movements, and riots alike. Civil war thus represents a specific form of political violence, distinguished from other types by its actors, objectives, and degree of organization.

Within this framework, Gurr (1970) identifies three main forms of political violence (Gurr 1970):

1. Turmoil, referring to relatively spontaneous and unorganized political violence with substantial popular participation, including violent political strikes, riots, political clashes, and localized rebellions;
2. Conspiracy, a highly organized form of political violence with limited participation, including organized political assassinations, small-scale guerrilla warfare, coups d'état, and mutinies;
3. Internal war, denoting a highly organized form of political violence with broad popular involvement, aimed at overthrowing the regime or dissolving the state, and often accompanied by widespread violence such as terrorism, large-scale guerrilla warfare, civil wars, and revolutions.

1.2 Defining the Internationalization of Civil Wars

Foreign intervention can be defined as the coercive application of power aimed at altering political processes or authority structures within another state (Macfarlane 2013). Rosenau's seminal work (1969) conceptualizes intervention as a "breach of conventions" and an "authority-oriented" act. He describes "*the behavior of one international actor toward another as interventionist when such*

behavior constitutes a clear departure from established patterns and when it seeks to alter or preserve the structure of political authority within the target society" (Roseneau 1969). Richard Little later pointed out that Rosenau's approach overlooked the motivations of intervening actors and excluded foreign aid as an important instrument of foreign policy (Little 1975).

According to Falk : *"intervention refers to conduct involving external animosity that credibly aims to bring about a fundamental change in the situation of the targeted nation*" (Falk 1964). Carment and James argue that the decision to intervene in civil conflicts can be strongly influenced by ethnic affinities between potential interveners and the target, suggesting that the higher the degree of transborder affinity, the more likely external intervention becomes (Carment and James 1995).Regan defines intervention as military and/or economic actions that depart from established conventions and enter the domestic affairs of a foreign state, targeting government authority structures with the aim of reshaping the balance of power between the government and opposition forces (Regan 1998).

In this sense, intervention refers to an engagement in the internal affairs of a state designed to modify or preserve its distribution of power and authority. To influence domestic politics, intervening actors may employ political, economic, or military instruments (Macfarlane 2013). Pearson (1974) identifies the movement of troops or military forces, acting under official orders, across the borders of a sovereign state, or the actions of foreign troops already deployed in the target country, as the clearest indicator of foreign military intervention. In general, any organized crossing of a border by military units may qualify as intervention, though its impact on both the target and intervening states can vary considerably (Pearson 1974).

Since the end of the Cold War, military intervention has become a central instrument of foreign policy, with Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan standing as prominent examples (Chojnacki 2006). The increasing internationalization of civil wars, meaning the growing military involvement of

external actors in intrastate conflicts, has been one of the key trends observed after the two world wars, making such conflicts increasingly difficult to resolve (Von Einsiedel et al. 2017). Indeed, the extent to which local conflicts become internationalized has risen sharply since the end of the Second World War. As Luard (1988) notes, the shrinking distance between states has heightened the degree to which political developments within one state concern neighboring governments (Luard 1988)..

Internationalization today involves not only nearby states but also global powers such as the United States and influential regional actors with strategic interests in the conflict. It further includes the involvement of international and regional organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the Arab League. Private international actors, NGOs, humanitarian organizations, multinational corporations, global media networks, and religious institutions, also play a significant role in shaping conflict dynamics (Odermatt 2013).

For the purpose of this study, internationalization refers to the transition from a primarily domestic armed conflict to one in which external actors, whether state or non-state, exercise a decisive influence on the balance of power through military, political, or economic means. While foreign intervention denotes a specific act aimed at altering or preserving authority structures within a target state, the internationalization of a civil war describes the broader process through which such interventions cumulatively transform the nature, scope, and legal classification of the conflict. This distinction is particularly relevant to the Yemeni case: the involvement of regional powers in March 2015, especially through direct military action, proxy support, and strategic political engagement, did not merely represent isolated episodes of intervention but rather marked a structural shift that reconfigured the conflict's dynamics and placed it within the category of an internationalized armed conflict under both political science theory and international humanitarian law.

1.3 International Migration: Concepts and analytical framework

Migration has long been a defining feature of human behavior, spanning across different eras. It is deeply rooted in human nature, fostering cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic exchanges between regions around the world. While humans have migrated since time immemorial, it was only in the 19th century that mass migrations began to take shape (Schindlmayr 2003).

In the context of globalization, migration represents both an opportunity and a challenge, particularly in terms of vulnerability and discrimination. When migrants are denied access to human rights, their ability to benefit from migration, and their potential contribution to the development of the societies in which they live, is undermined (International Organization for Migration, Glossaire Sur La Migration. Droit International De La Migration No 34, 2019). In addition to posing difficulties for migrants themselves, large-scale migration, while opening up economic and social opportunities for host states, also constitutes a major challenge to social cohesion.

Mass migration generally occurs between developing and developed states, driven by the extreme asymmetry in economic prosperity, social conditions, security, and human rights. The rise in the number of international migrants has been facilitated by economic globalization, in which goods, services, and capital circulate freely, yet significant barriers remain to the cross-border movement of people, particularly low-skilled workers. The globalization of markets has thus not been accompanied by a globalization of labor. This mismatch between the number of people wishing to migrate and the limited legal opportunities available to do so explains the large number of irregular migrants in many countries, the fact that many have fallen victim to trafficking or smuggling, and the "constant deterioration" of their human rights situation (Grant 2006).

Given the multiple challenges raised by migration, both for migrants and for states, it is essential to establish a robust legal framework that transcends national borders in order to guarantee protection at the international level. Over time, the international community has progressively developed a set

of norms designed to regulate migration while protecting the fundamental rights of people on the move. This body of law is commonly referred to as International Migration Law (IML).

IML is the branch of international law that governs the movement of persons across borders. It sets out the general and specific legal norms applicable to such movements and establishes the international principles and rules that define the rights and obligations of states in matters of migration, as well as the rights and duties of migrants themselves. The international normative framework on migration includes general provisions, most notably those found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948. The Preamble of the UDHR affirms the "*inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family*," which form the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world. The notion of dignity is reaffirmed in Article 1, which states that "*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights*."[1] Article 2 further declares that "*Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration.*" The UDHR also enshrines several rights directly relevant to migrants, particularly freedom of movement, guaranteed under Article 13, which provides that "*Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state*."

In the years following the adoption of the UDHR in 1948, which laid the foundation for an international human rights protection system, priority was first given to the protection of refugees, and subsequently to the definition of citizens' rights (Grant 2006). This led to the adoption of a new legal instrument in 1951, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, later amended by the 1967 Protocol. Together, the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol form the cornerstone of the international refugee protection regime. The 1951 Convention defines the term "refugee," enumerates refugees' rights, and sets out states' legal obligations to protect them. It prohibits the

[1] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 1, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948

expulsion or forcible return (refoulement) of refugees to any country or territory where their life or freedom would be threatened (United Nations 2013). The 1967 Protocol expanded the Convention's scope to include persons who became refugees after 1 January 1951, without geographical limitation. By the end of 2013, the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol had been ratified by 144 and 145 United Nations member states, respectively (United Nations 2013).

2. The 2014 Yemeni Civil War: Causes, Actors, and Regional Dynamics

Since 2014, Yemen has been experiencing an unprecedented geopolitical crisis. This crisis has profoundly affected both the political and economic life of the country, leaving behind a fragmented state at every level. The political and socio-economic challenges generated by the 2014 conflict were further exacerbated by the internationalization of the war in 2015.

Our analysis of the Yemeni civil war will proceed in two stages:

1. First, we will examine the domestic causes that led to the outbreak of the 2014 civil war;
2. Then, we will analyze the various internal actors involved in the conflict, seeking to understand their respective motivations.

2.1 Structural Domestic Factors Underpinning the 2014 Geopolitical Crisis

The outbreak of the 2014 civil war resulted from a long series of events that began in the aftermath of the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. The attempted civil war of 1994 marked a rupture with the ambition to build a unified Yemen and revealed deep discontent, particularly in the southern region. However, subsequent developments showed that discontent in Yemen was far more widespread, as evidenced by a series of six wars between the Houthi movement, based in northern Yemen, and the central government.

These internal instabilities, compounded by the outbreak of the Arab Spring, severely weakened and fragmented the Yemeni state, rendering it increasingly vulnerable.

2.1.1 The six wars between the Houthis and Saleh's Government (2004-2010)

In 2004, the first war between the Houthi group and the Yemeni government broke out, marking the beginning of a cycle of violence that lasted until 2010. The Saada War represents a key event for understanding the political and social transformations that followed the Arab Spring of 2011, as well as the 2014 civil war and the subsequent conflict between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis in 2015.

These successive crises further undermined Yemen's political structure and led to increasing political, tribal, and social fragmentation across the Republic of Yemen (S. Day 2012).. Despite Saleh's persistent threats, the Houthi movement continued to gain in popularity, challenging Saleh's legitimacy (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells 2010).

Between 2004 and 2010, the central government and the Houthis fought six wars in northern Yemen. With each successive round of fighting, the Houthis strengthened their position, while anti-government sentiment spread among an already war-torn and neglected northern population (Sharp and Brudnick 2015). This series of conflicts following the 2004 Saada War can largely be attributed to the Yemeni government's mismanagement of the initial crisis. Indeed, Saleh sought to suppress the Houthi rebellion by eliminating its leader, Husayn al-Huthi. However, this move only deepened the Houthis' opposition to the regime and increased their popular and tribal support.

2.1.2 The security vacuum created by the 2011 Arab Spring

Yemen was no exception to the events of 2011. Like Tunisians and Egyptians, Yemenis aspired to improve their living conditions and to remove President Saleh, a corrupt leader whose rule had led to the country's gradual impoverishment. Following the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, which successfully ousted their presidents, Yemenis hoped to achieve a similar outcome.

The uprisings of 2011 marked a rebellion against political and economic corruption at the highest levels, an outpouring of frustration born from decades of irresponsible elite rule and economic marginalization (Hill 2017). In response to the growing wave of demonstrations, Saleh announced that he would not run in the 2013 elections. However, this declaration failed to appease the protesters, and the demonstrations quickly spread to other regions (Al-Tamimi and Venkatesha 2020).

Confronted with widespread public discontent, Saleh shifted his approach and began violently repressing the protest movement. His brutal response triggered major defections within his ranks, including from the military (S. Day 2012). The regime's poor management of the protests and its failure to heed the population's demands ultimately marked the end of Saleh's 33-year rule. He eventually agreed to step down under a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-brokered deal (Lackner 2023), leaving behind a country economically fragile and politically divided.

On 21 February 2012, Yemen held a referendum that confirmed interim president Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi as the country's new head of state (Thiel 2012). As part of Yemen's transitional framework, representatives of the country's various political factions convened the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) between 2013 and 2014 (Sharp and Brudnick 2015).

2.1.3 Limits and collapse of Yemen's Post-2011 transitional framework

The NDC was intended to bring together all major Yemeni political forces: traditional parties and figures, the northern Houthi movement, the southern secessionist movement, and the new actors that had emerged from the 2011 uprisings, including women, youth, and civil society organizations (Lackner 2023). The goal of the NDC was to reach a consensus on the constitutional foundations of a new government to be formed after the 2014 elections (Day and Brehony 2020).

However, the conference failed to reach agreement on several key and contentious issues, such as the details of the future federal state, the southern question, and military reform (Lackner 2023). The decision to divide Yemen into six federal regions, and the boundaries assigned to them, marked a decisive rupture between the Houthi movement and the transitional process.

Perceiving this decision as a direct attempt to exclude them from power, to confine the population of Saada to continued poverty, and to perpetuate a long history of marginalization, the Houthis stormed the presidential palace and placed President Hadi under house arrest. At that point, they forged an alliance with Saleh, an alliance based solely on their mutual opposition to al-Islah and, in particular, to General Ali Mohsen (Porter 2017).

2.2 Internal Stakeholders shaping the 2014 conflict dynamics

The Yemeni civil war involved a diverse array of internal actors, including non-state armed groups, transnational organizations, political parties, and government actors. This diversity further complicated the 2014 crisis, creating an intricate web of competing interests, strategies, and objectives.

2.2.1 The Non-State Armed Houthi Group

The Houthi movement, also known as Ansar Allah, is a Zaydi-dominated revivalist Shia political and insurgent movement (Sharp and Brudnick 2015). It seized power by taking control of the capital, Sana'a, in September 2014 without encountering significant resistance. The Houthis subsequently dissolved parliament and announced the creation of the National Transitional Council (Domazeti 2020). The primary motivation behind the Houthis' takeover was not only their exclusion from the NDC and the confinement of their communities to impoverished provinces in the proposed federal distribution, but also long-standing discrimination. As Clausen (2015) notes, the Houthis did not organize to establish territorial control over parts of the country or create a "Houthistan," but

rather to rectify decades of political and economic marginalization of northern Yemen by the regime (Clausen 2015).

The Houthis had long felt excluded from power and from a share of national resources. The NDC did little to convince them that the Hadi government would serve their interests (Cordesman 2022). Significantly, in 2005, the Houthis staged local protests against the marginalization of their home regions and the social and political discrimination against Zaydi Shias, who represent approximately 34 to 45% of Yemen's population (Watol 2024). Initially, the grievances of the Houthis were largely local and political, with Abdul Malik al-Houthi's movement seeking to end economic underdevelopment, political marginalization, and discrimination in Zaydi regions (Watol 2024). Indeed, these Shia regions were extremely poor and faced severe economic challenges (Masoudi, Abdollahzadeh and Saeedi 2021).

2.2.2 The Southern Secessionist Movement

The southern separatist movement, commonly referred to as Al-Hirak, was formed in 2007 as a coalition of southern Yemeni factions that had long been dissatisfied with the northern government in Sana'a (Park 2022). The "Southern cause," as southern Yemenis call their collective demands, became especially salient following the 1994 north–south war, when southern factories were looted, lands were confiscated, and southerners were forced to withdraw from public service and the military (Augustin 2014).

Northern elites under Saleh's regime seized private lands and redistributed them to individuals affiliated with the government, effectively excluding the southern population from participation in the unified Yemeni political system (Jabbour 2018).. Given the shared grievances of the majority of Yemenis over centralized decision-making in Sana'a and the concentration of power under President Saleh and his inner circle, a broad consensus emerged on the need for decentralization (Al-Akhali 2014) This led to the formation of the Hirak Movement, demanding the secession of southern Yemen

from the Republic of Yemen and the restoration of the former independent state of South Yemen (Jabbour 2018). By 2007, the southern movement (Al-Hirak) had become a powerful actor opposing the regime, fueled by anger and socio-political inequalities (Watol 2024).

2.2.3 The Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah)

The Yemeni Congregation for Reform, also known as Islah, is a political party established in 1990, shortly after Yemen's unification, with support from Saudi Arabia. It brought together members who were politically skeptical of, or even opposed to, the merger of the North and South Yemen Republics (Schmitz et Burrowes 2017). Islah directly descended from an Islamic front created by Saleh in the 1970s to curb the spread of Marxist influence from the South (Day 2010).

The party was led by Abd Allah al-Ahmar but was ideologically grounded in the principles of the Muslim Brotherhood, an ideology introduced to Yemen in the 1960s by teachers expelled from Egypt and Syria. Islah also drew on the Salafist current supported by Saudi Arabia (Brehony 2015). The Yemeni Congregation for Reform became Yemen's third-largest party, sending 63 deputies to parliament in the 1993 elections (Domazeti 2020).

2.2.4 Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

From the early stages of Al-Qaeda's development in the 1990s, Yemenis volunteered to support the organization's growth (S. Day 2012). Yemenis had previously participated in jihads; during the 1980s, they joined *mujahideen* networks funded by the U.S. and Saudi governments during the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. When Osama bin Laden transformed these networks into Al-Qaeda, his base of Yemeni supporters remained strong (S. Day 2012). In January 2009, Al-Qaeda in Yemen formally merged with the Saudi branch of the transnational network, forming a new regional branch called Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) (S. Day 2012).

During the 2015 conflict, AQAP became a major concern for Western actors, particularly the United States, due to the organization's history of targeting American interests. Rhetorically, Al-Qaeda exploited the growing sectarianism following the Saudi-led intervention to position itself as the defender of Sunni Muslims against the Shiite Houthis (Clausen 2020).

2.3. Regional Influence and intervention in the 2014 civil war

The regional dimension of the 2014 Yemeni civil war significantly shaped both the dynamics of the conflict and its humanitarian consequences. The intervention of external actors not only altered the military balance within Yemen but also intensified internal fragmentation and displacement, exacerbating patterns of both internal and cross-border migration. The following subsections analyze the primary regional stakeholders: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Iran, highlighting their distinct motivations, strategies, and implications for the course of the conflict and the migratory phenomenon. Other regional actors, such as Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain, also played roles, either as mediators, supportive partners, or symbolic participants, but their impact was comparatively limited.

2.3.1 Saudi Arabia's Strategic involvement in the 2014 Yemeni conflict

Saudi Arabia's intervention in the 2014 Yemeni civil war resulted in significant civilian casualties and numerous injuries caused by airstrikes (Ali, Ali and Khan 2023). Saudi Arabia took charge of the war in the north, forming, equipping, and financing the remnants of the Yemeni army, complemented by newly recruited soldiers tasked with ground combat and supported by Saudi air power (Brehony 2020). Its ground forces primarily defended the border, and very few Saudi soldiers were deployed inside Yemen during the early years of fighting (Brehony 2020).

Riyadh's intervention in Yemen was closely linked to a shift in Saudi foreign policy that began after the Arab Spring. Often framed as part of a broader struggle for regional influence between Saudi

Arabia and Iran, Operation Decisive Storm appeared as an attempt by the Kingdom to reassert its dominance over Yemen while projecting greater power in the region as a whole (Al-Madhaji, Sidahmed and Al-Muslimi 2015). Historically reluctant to intervene directly, Saudi Arabia's decision to launch Operation Decisive Storm represented a major departure from this policy, driven largely by concerns over what it perceived as Iran's growing presence in Yemen. Since 2011, Saudi Arabia has become less hesitant to use military force to defend its regional interests. Alongside the UAE, it deployed troops to Bahrain in 2011 under the Peninsula Shield Force, participated in the NATO-led Operation Unified Protector in Libya that same year with Qatar, Morocco, and Jordan, and joined the US-led coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria from September 2014. In Yemen, since March 2015, it has taken a leading role within the Arab coalition (Ragab 2017) .

The Saudi intervention had profound consequences for Yemeni migration. Airstrikes, border closures, and ongoing ground combat created large-scale internal displacement and drove refugees toward neighboring countries, especially within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region.

2. 3.2 Emirati security and strategic interests in Yemen's 2014 conflict

The UAE has emerged as one of the key members of the Arab coalition in Yemen and a major actor on the ground (Asl et al. 2021). Its initial mission consisted of training and supporting the "popular resistance" groups, pro-Hadi forces, engaged in military confrontations against the Houthis. Over time, however, the UAE's role evolved from participating under the "leadership of King Salman" to becoming a co-leader of coalition operations, both in terms of troop numbers and the sophistication of the missions it conducted in Yemen (Ragab 2017) .

Beyond the shared objectives of the Saudi-UAE-led coalition, Abu Dhabi has pursued its own strategic goals. These include economic, political, and security interests directly linked to the UAE's national security. Southern Yemeni cities coveted by the UAE host significant natural resources, including oil, gas, minerals, and fisheries, and Aden is among Yemen's most important coastal cities,

with ports vital to the UAE's aspirations to expand its influence over the strategic Bab al-Mandab strait. The UAE sees the Bab al-Mandab corridor as a natural extension of its national security sphere, strengthened by the relative weakening of other maritime trade routes in the region. It has repeatedly attempted to obtain control over the port of Aden, with limited success, except for a few attempts in November 2008 (Asl et al. 2021). For the UAE, Aden is crucial to its broader ambition of establishing itself as a regional power distinct from other Arab actors (Manea 2024).

Dubai and Abu Dhabi have become major global hubs for international trade and finance. Stability in Yemen could threaten this position, as Yemeni ports could potentially rival those of the UAE, especially within the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which crosses several Arab countries. If the Gulf of Aden were to become a major transit zone aligned with new commercial corridors, it could undermine the UAE's economic appeal. In this context, the UAE has sought control over Aden, al-Mukha, Balhaf, the port of Hodeidah, and particularly the strategic islands of Socotra and Mayyun at the entrance to the Gulf of Aden (Domazeti 2020). Over the past three decades, the UAE has positioned itself as an international maritime hub and has continuously sought to strengthen its economic partnerships to remain at the forefront of regional competition.

The UAE's involvement contributed to the fragmentation of southern Yemen, creating competing authorities and influencing migration patterns, both internally and toward neighboring states. Unlike Saudi Arabia, whose intervention was primarily security-driven, the UAE's engagement combined military, economic, and geopolitical objectives.

2. 3.3 Iran's Role in Shaping the 2014 Yemeni Crisis Dynamics

Iran's involvement in the Yemeni conflict was primarily indirect but symbolically and politically significant. Saudi Arabia cited Iran's support for the Houthis as a key justification for its intervention. Statements by Iranian officials, such as Ali Akbar Velayati and Ali Reza Zakani, suggested political and ideological backing for the Houthis, although other officials, including

Marziyeh Afkham, denied direct military involvement ((Middle East Monitor 2014); (Askarieh 2014); (Zweiri 2016). Houthi representatives similarly claimed that Iran does not arm them and that their cooperation is based on shared political objectives, notably opposition to American influence (Al-Monitor 2013).

Despite these denials, Iran's support, whether ideological, political, or limited financial/military assistance, remains a widely recognized factor in the conflict (Al Basoos and Al Hinai 2020) (Transfeld 2017). Politically and ideologically, the Houthis and Iran share anti-American and anti-interventionist stances, which partially explain the coalition's perception of Iran as a key regional antagonist (Clausen 2020) (Al Dosari and George 2020).

Iran's indirect involvement contributed to the broader internationalization of the conflict, prompting increased Saudi and UAE intervention, which in turn intensified internal displacement and cross-border migration. The interplay between Iranian influence, Gulf state intervention, and local factionalism created a complex migratory environment for Yemenis, with displacement patterns heavily shaped by perceptions of security and external support.

3. Migration as a consequence of the 2014 Yemeni civil war

Since the outbreak of the civil war, Yemen has faced an unprecedented humanitarian crisis (Ahmed 2019). Widespread food shortages, combined with insufficient access to clean water and healthcare, have created disastrous conditions for the Yemeni population (Alshammari and Sity 2023). Approximately 70% of the population relies on humanitarian aid for survival, and millions have been forced to flee their homes (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2022). The conflict has also led to massive internal displacement, with millions of Yemenis threatened by famine and disease (Alshammari and Sity 2023), due in large part to the destruction of health infrastructure, making it the world's largest humanitarian disaster (Guha-Sapir and Ogbu 2022). Rising insecurity and violence have taken a heavy toll on civilians, triggering large-scale internal

and cross-border population movements (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and International Organization for Migration 2015). According to the Humanitarian Response Plan, 18.2 million Yemenis depend on humanitarian aid, including 4.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 60,193 refugees and asylum seekers (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2024). Over the past five years, nearly four million people have been uprooted, with an estimated one million struggling to survive. The war in Yemen has thus transformed the country into the world's largest humanitarian crisis (Watol 2024).

3.1 International emigration as a transnational manifestation of the 2014 Yemeni civil war

The internationalized civil war in Yemen has generated an unprecedented social crisis, exposing millions to food insecurity, displacing them within the country, and forcing civilians to migrate to escape the conflict. The political instability has escalated into a severe civil conflict, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis by creating dire conditions for food, water, healthcare, and energy access, as well as undermining the ability of millions to lead dignified lives (Watol 2024).

The prolonged conflict, intensified by the Saudi intervention in 2015, has led to a significant increase in emigration, forcing over 4.3 million people to leave their homes (Migrant and Refugee Section 2021). According to IOM data (2023), approximately 190,000 Yemenis and foreign nationals have fled Yemen since the start of the conflict, highlighting the scale of displacement and the dire living conditions in the country. Djibouti, located just 100 kilometers west of the Yemeni city of Taiz, hosted over 37,000 Yemenis in 2020, emphasizing its proximity and role as a refuge for those fleeing the conflict (International Organization for Migration 2023). According to the United Nations, in 2019, at least 2,200 Yemenis were registered at the Markazi refugee camp in Djibouti (Migrant and Refugee Section 2021).

Additionally, many Yemenis have sought safety in neighboring Somalia (Ahmado, Eidle Nur and Aden 2019). Despite its own challenges, Somalia has become an unexpected sanctuary for Yemeni refugees. More than 14,000 Yemenis have sought refuge there, driven by the urgent need for security amid the turmoil. Somalia's adherence to the 1951 Refugee Convention obligated the country to accept asylum seekers while highlighting the need for substantial support and capacity building to ensure adequate care for displaced populations.

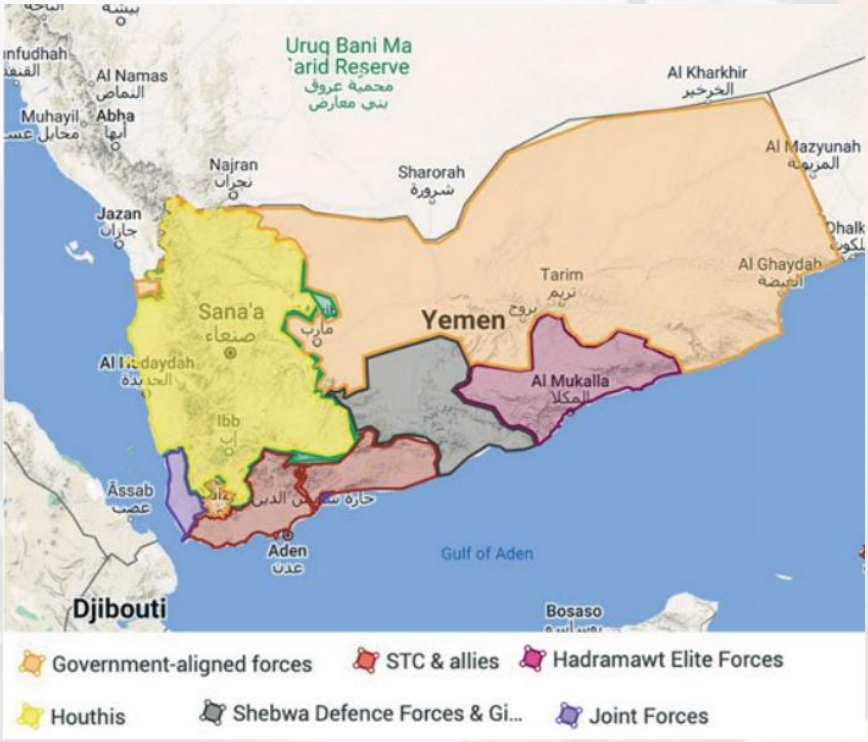
Smaller but notable numbers of Yemenis have sought asylum in Egypt (5,032) and Germany (3,992) in 2018 (International Organization for Migration 2023). Yemeni emigrants have also sought refuge in Ethiopia, where the government recognizes Yemenis as prima facie refugees following nationality verification and registration procedures (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and International Organization for Migration 2015). Several emigrants have also fled to Gulf countries, primarily Saudi Arabia, which has hosted the largest number, approximately 30,000 Yemenis, consistent with a long-standing regional migration trend toward the kingdom (Coppi 2018).

However, while these figures demonstrate the scale of Yemeni emigration, they also reveal significant limitations in the international response. The uneven distribution of refugees across neighboring states underscores structural gaps in regional and global mechanisms for migration management. Countries like Somalia and Djibouti, already facing their own socio-economic challenges, have had to absorb substantial numbers of displaced individuals with limited resources, exposing weaknesses in support systems and humanitarian aid coordination. Moreover, the reliance on national frameworks for refugee protection highlights disparities in access to basic services, legal recognition, and long-term integration opportunities. This unevenness raises questions about the adequacy of the international legal regime, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, in responding to complex, prolonged conflicts that generate mass displacement. It also emphasizes the need for a more robust, coordinated international strategy that balances state sovereignty with humanitarian obligations and ensures sustainable support for displaced populations.

3.2 Internal Displacement Caused by the 2014 Yemeni Civil War

The IOM defined the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) as: "*Person or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border*" (International Organization for Migration 2025). In the case of Yemen, the Yemenis were precisely displaced because of the territorial division of Yemen, following the civil war of September 2014 (**Figure 1**). The Houthis dominate most of the north-western highlands, including the capital Sana'a, as well as major adjacent governorates such as Amran, Dhamar, and large parts of Ibb and Hajjah. Government-aligned forces control much of eastern Yemen, including the expansive desert regions of Hadramawt, Al Mahrah, and parts of Marib. The Southern Transitional Council (STC) and its allies hold territory concentrated in southern Yemen, especially around Aden, Lahj, Al Dhale', and parts of Abyan. Hadramawt Elite Forces control sections of the coastal Hadramawt region around Al Mukalla. Shabwa Defence Forces and Giants Brigades hold strategic zones in Shabwa governorate. Joint Forces control a narrow stretch along the western Red Sea coast, including areas near Al Khokha and Mocha.

Figure 1: Yemeni Territorial Divisions as a consequence of the 2014 civil war



Source: SALISBURY, Peter. Snakes and Ladders: The Regional and International Dimensions of Yemen's Civil War. The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform. 2024.

The fragmentation of territorial control in Yemen has significant implications for IDPs. As frontlines shift and authority is divided among competing actors, IDPs face major obstacles to safe movement, access to humanitarian assistance, and prospects for sustainable return. Fragmented governance creates inconsistent administrative procedures, checkpoints, and security conditions, often forcing displaced families to navigate multiple jurisdictions with varying levels of stability and services. In many cases, IDPs become trapped in areas where humanitarian access is restricted or politicized. Moreover, the lack of unified state authority complicates efforts to assess needs, deliver aid equitably, and implement durable solutions, leaving displaced populations in prolonged conditions of vulnerability and uncertainty.

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen has displaced over 4.5 million people (Migrant and Refugee Section 2021), representing roughly 14% of the population (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2025). Displacement remains widespread, with millions of IDPs forced to move multiple times. Vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by climate shocks, including floods and droughts, which threaten agricultural livelihoods and water security (International Organization for Migration 2025).

Most internal displacement has occurred in the governorates of Marib, Hudaydah, Hajjah, and Taizz, with over 70% of the displaced population being women and children (International Organization for Migration 2023). In 2021, 23.4 million Yemenis depended on humanitarian aid for survival, including 4.3 million IDPs in 2022, making Yemen the fourth-largest population of conflict-induced IDPs globally. Nearly 40% of these IDPs live in informal sites where access to basic services is severely limited or nonexistent (Migrant and Refugee Section 2021).

Sanitation and basic infrastructure remain inadequate in many IDP sites, further worsening living conditions (International Organization for Migration 2023). Most displaced individuals reside in nearly 2,000 makeshift sites, but less than 25% receive humanitarian assistance. Approximately 50% of these sites are located within 5 kilometers of active conflict zones, exposing residents disproportionately to the dangers of armed conflict (International Organization for Migration 2023).

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee declared a Level 3 emergency in Yemen in July 2015; roughly two-thirds of the population requires assistance, with nearly 40% in critical need. Women, children, ethnic and religious minorities, and IDPs are particularly vulnerable (Coppi 2018). Many conflict-affected families lack formal rental agreements and face the risk of eviction. Nearly 40% of IDPs live in informal sites with little to no access to essential services (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2022). Moreover, migrants in Yemen face severe deprivation, with limited access to food, healthcare, and safe shelter. Many are forced to live in makeshift structures

or sleep on the streets, resorting to begging to survive. This extreme vulnerability exposes them to abuse, exploitation, and violence (International Organization for Migration 2024).

This extensive internal displacement highlights the multidimensional nature of Yemen's humanitarian crisis. Beyond mere numbers, the data reveal a pattern of compounded vulnerability: displacement is not only widespread but recurrent, with IDPs often forced to move multiple times, undermining any sense of stability or social cohesion. The concentration of displaced populations in governorates like Marib, Hudaydah, Hajjah, and Taizz reflects both geographic proximity to conflict hotspots and the limitations of local coping capacities. The disproportionate impact on women and children underscores the intersection of conflict with pre-existing social inequalities, while the prevalence of IDPs in informal and unsafe sites illustrates the insufficiency of formal protection mechanisms. Furthermore, the proximity of many sites to active conflict zones demonstrates how displacement itself can exacerbate exposure to violence, creating a cyclical vulnerability where fleeing one threat leads to another. Taken together, these patterns suggest that addressing Yemen's internal displacement requires not only humanitarian aid but also strategic interventions that consider security, social protection, and long-term resilience of affected communities.

3.3 Yemen as a Corridor: Transit migration trends and implications

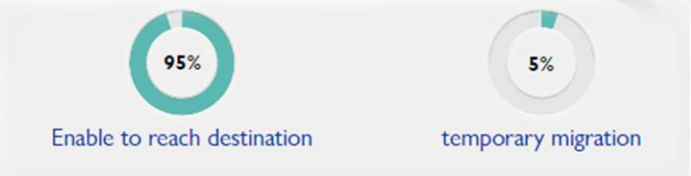
While Yemen is a territorially fragmented, economically fragile, and humanitarianly vulnerable country, it remains a destination for many migrants, primarily from the Horn of Africa. Indeed, given Yemen's geographical location, sharing a long border with Saudi Arabia, most migrants from the Horn of Africa use Yemen as a transit point before continuing on to their final destination. This is known as transit migration.

The concept of transit migration, first entered the public discourse and the scientific attention during the 1990s, as pushed onto the agenda by various international organizations, think tanks and

European institutions, in relation to the growing intensification of flows and diversification of migrations paths towards Europe (Castagnone 2011). Transit migration should be understood as a process rather than a fixed migration status, an intermediate phase that spans across different migrant categories, including both regular and irregular migrants, voluntary and forced movements, and individuals ranging from workers to students. These transit phases occur under highly diverse conditions, driven by varying motivations and intentions, and often lead to multiple, frequently unpredictable, outcomes. Migrants' plans and aspirations tend to evolve over time, underscoring that migration is rarely a linear journey. Initial intentions may be reshaped, redirected, or completely redefined at different stages along the migratory trajectory.

Yemen has historically been an important transit point between the Horn of Africa and oil-producing countries. This trend continued even before the outbreak of the civil war. Abdelmuniz Aqlan, director of the Africa Department of the Yemeni Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated in 2005 that "*very few migrants remain or want to remain in Yemen. There is essentially clandestine transit immigration, particularly from Africa. The real question is that of Yemen's responsibility towards the countries of destination of this clandestine immigration.*" (Thiollet 2009). More recent data further confirms this trend. IOM's data of October 2025 indicates that the overwhelming majority of migrants leaving monitored locations in Yemen do so with the primary aim of continuing their journey toward their intended final destination (**Figure 2**). With 95 percent reporting that onward movement enables them to reach their destination, this trend highlights the role of Yemen as a transit country within broader regional migration routes, rather than a place of long-term settlement. Only a small proportion, around 5 percent, engage in temporary migration, reflecting short-term or cyclical mobility within the country. Overall, these figures underscore that onward aspirations remain the dominant driver of migrant movement out of Yemen, shaped by the broader dynamics of mobility across the Horn of Africa–Arabian Peninsula corridor.

Figure 2: Main Reasons for the outflow migrants from Yemen



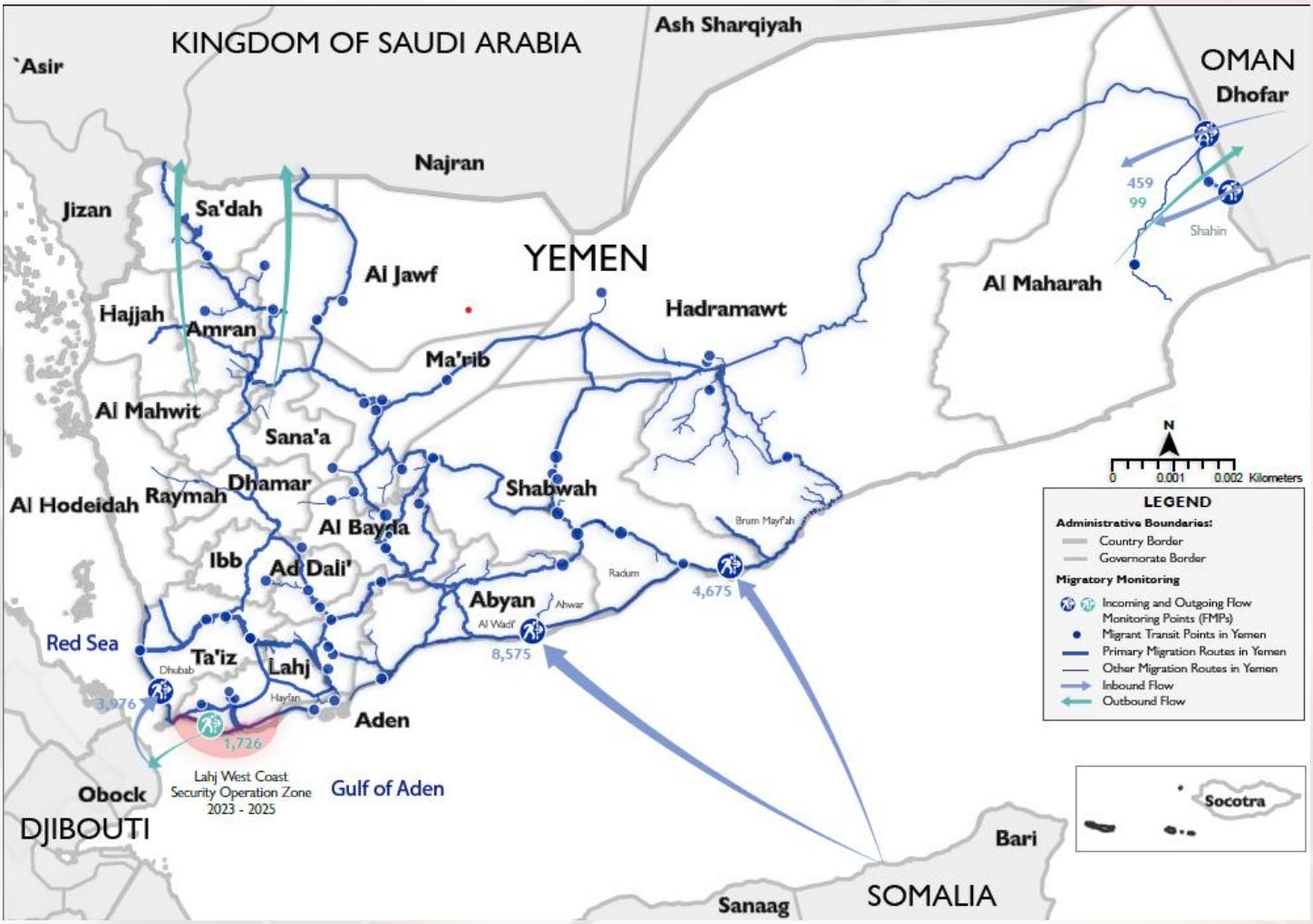
Source: International Organization for Migration (IOM), Displacement Tracking Matrix | Dtm Yemen Flow Monitoring Registry Dashboard Incoming and Outgoing Migrants - October 2025

Yemen occupies a central position in regional mobility dynamics, functioning as a key corridor linking the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula (**Figure 3**). Large numbers of migrants arrive along the southern coastline, particularly in Abyan, Shabwah and Ta'iz, after crossing from Somalia and Djibouti. These coastal governorates serve as the first point of entry before migrants disperse inland. From there, movements tend to follow established pathways through central Yemen, passing through areas such as Al Bayda, Dhamar, Ma'rib and Shabwah, which operate as major inland transit hubs due to their geographic position and road connectivity.

As migrants progress northward, the flow divides into two main trajectories: one leading toward the Saudi border through Sa'dah and Amran, and another continuing eastward toward Oman through Al Maharah. These two border regions therefore function as the principal exit points for onward migration into the Gulf. Along the entire route, several monitoring locations systematically record migrant movements, indicating both the scale of arrivals from the Horn of Africa and the volume of outbound movement toward Saudi Arabia and Oman.

This distribution of entry points, transit hubs and exit corridors reflects not only long-standing mobility patterns but also the influence of geography, conflict dynamics and economic opportunities, which together shape Yemen's complex role in regional migration systems.

Figure 3: Migration flow and movement in Yemen



Source: International Organization for Migration (IOM), Displacement Tracking Matrix | Dtm Yemen Flow Monitoring Registry Dashboard Incoming and Outgoing Migrants - October 2025

Building on the description of Yemen as a key transit country, it is important to situate this phenomenon within a broader regional and comparative perspective. The ongoing civil war, compounded by interventions from regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran, has intensified migration flows, transforming traditional transit routes and reshaping patterns of mobility. Migrants in Yemen face significant vulnerabilities, including exposure to violence,

exploitation by traffickers, and restricted access to basic services, highlighting the humanitarian dimension of transit migration. Comparatively, similar dynamics can be observed in other regional transit corridors, such as Libya's role in the Mediterranean migration routes, where conflict, economic instability, and governance gaps similarly channel large flows of migrants toward more stable destination countries. These parallels underscore that transit migration is not merely a logistical phenomenon but a process deeply intertwined with conflict dynamics, governance structures, and regional power relations. Understanding Yemen's role in this broader context allows for a more nuanced interpretation of migrant behavior, the drivers of mobility, and the challenges facing both transit and destination countries.

4. What makes the Yemeni refugee distinct? An analytical perspective

Unlike other major refugee populations, Yemeni refugees face a unique combination of state fragmentation and regional geopolitical pressures. These factors create a distinct refugee profile, one marked by legal ambiguity, structural vulnerability, and chronic underprotection. This specificity suggests that the impact of the 2014 civil war cannot be understood solely in terms of displacement numbers, but must be situated within a broader reflection on the position of Yemeni refugees within the regional context.

4.1 The absence of a central state and the production of extreme vulnerability

One of the most distinctive features of the Yemeni crisis lies in the fragmentation of the national territory and the erosion of centralized state authority. As shown earlier in this article, Yemen is now deeply divided, with territories controlled by the Houthis, the southern independence movement backed by the United Arab Emirates, Tareq Saleh (nephew of former President Saleh), the internationally recognized government supported by Saudi Arabia, the Islah party, and parts of the country under the control of AQAP. Despite a peace agreement signed in April 2023 between the

Houthis and the coalition, and the establishment of a Presidential Council, Yemen remains fragmented, fragile, and weakened at every level of its political and social life.

This configuration has two major consequences. First, the absence of a unified government prevents the implementation of national protection frameworks, leaving displaced persons without effective administrative or legal safeguards. Second, the institutional collapse affects core civil documentation systems, complicating access to identity papers, travel documents and legal status abroad. In this sense, the Yemeni refugee is not merely fleeing a conflict zone, but escaping a territory where the state has ceased to function as a provider of rights, services, and security. This profound institutional vacuum places Yemeni refugees in a position of heightened vulnerability compared to refugees originating from countries where some form of state authority continues to exist despite conflict.

4.2 Migration toward structurally fragile Host States

A second factor that singularizes the Yemeni refugee lies in the geography of displacement. Unlike other major refugee crises in which neighboring states possess relatively strong administrative capacities, Yemeni migration patterns are directed primarily toward states that are themselves structurally fragile. Somalia, for example, remains affected by chronic insecurity, the resurgence of Al-Shabaab, and large-scale internal displacement. According to the UNHCR, Somalia is suffering from one of the world's longest-running humanitarian crises. For more than thirty years, armed conflict, political instability, floods, and extreme droughts have led to a situation where today almost one in five Somalis is displaced within the country's borders. The country also suffers from one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world (UNHCR 2022).

Djibouti, despite its strategic position, struggles with severe economic constraints and limited public services. Climate shocks, particularly droughts and flash floods, have led to increased malnutrition, population displacement, and food insecurity, as well as recurring disease outbreaks. In addition to

climate shocks, one of the main drivers of food insecurity in Djibouti is the country's reliance on imports, which cover 90% of its food needs, making it extremely vulnerable to price fluctuations in international markets. High unemployment and widespread poverty exacerbate humanitarian needs. Approximately 40% of the working-age population is unemployed. The country's poverty rate reaches 79%, with 42% living in extreme poverty (ACAPS 2023). It is important to note that Djibouti is the only country in the region that offers Yemenis *prima facie* refugee status, granting them protection collectively in view of the country's political situation (Ali et al. 2025). Ethiopia continues to experience political tensions, economic challenges, and the lingering effects of the Tigray conflict.

These host states therefore lack the institutional strength required to absorb large refugee populations or offer durable protection mechanisms. As a result, Yemeni refugees face a double vulnerability: they flee a failed state only to enter countries with limited capacity to guarantee their rights or integrate them socially and economically. This contrasts sharply with classical cases such as Syrian refugees in Jordan or Lebanese refugees in Europe, where receiving states, despite their own constraints, possess more robust institutional infrastructures. Indeed, Yemen is not bordered by politically stable and administratively strong states. The Horn of Africa, on the other side of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait opposite Yemen, is experiencing several humanitarian, food, economic, and security crises. Many Yemenis are also heading to Saudi Arabia in search of work and improved living conditions. At least 30% of the Saudi Arabia's population is temporary foreign migrants, including many Yemenis. However, they lack basic human or labor rights associated with international labor law (Lackner 2022).

Comparatively, the situation of Yemeni refugees differs markedly from other large-scale displacement crises. For instance, Syrian refugees fleeing to Jordan or Germany benefit from host countries with relatively robust administrative capacities, established legal frameworks for asylum, and international support networks that facilitate integration or resettlement. In contrast, Yemeni

refugees primarily enter countries with limited institutional strength, such as Somalia, Djibouti, and Ethiopia, where chronic instability, economic fragility, and weak governance constrain the ability to provide durable protection or meaningful social and economic integration. This contrast highlights that refugee vulnerability is not solely determined by the conditions of origin, but also by the structural capacity of host states. The combination of a failed or fragmented state of origin and weak host states amplifies risks of prolonged displacement, limited access to rights, and heightened exposure to exploitation, setting Yemeni refugees apart from other major refugee populations in the region and globally.

4.3 The Yemeni refugee as a matter of international public interest

Since 2023, several international bodies, including the UNHCR, the Human Rights Committee and various judicial and quasi-judicial mechanisms, have emphasized the idea that the protection of refugees is not only a humanitarian concern, but a component of international public interest. Some authors have even described refugee protection as a global public good (Suhrke 1998). In the Yemeni case, this perspective is particularly relevant. The instability generated by unprotected displacement flows extends beyond Yemen's borders and threatens regional and global stability. Large-scale movements in the Horn of Africa can intensify economic pressures, heighten political fragility, and create opportunities for transnational crime and militant recruitment. Moreover, the strategic significance of the Bab al-Mandab Strait means that instability linked to unmanaged population movements can affect international maritime security and global trade routes. The Bab el Mandeb Strait is a strategic chokepoint essential for trade and the free movement of oil and gas. (F. Gresh 2017). Geopolitically, it constitutes the most sensitive bottleneck for international navigation in the long waterway that includes the Strait of Gibraltar, the Mediterranean Sea, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. (Lott 2021). Uncontrolled migration flows from Yemen to the Horn of Africa can pose a major challenge to regional stability and thus affect the

strategic importance of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, creating an obstacle to international trade in the region.

The Yemeni refugee thus embodies a broader dilemma: the tension between the principles of state sovereignty and the imperatives of international protection. The erosion of the Yemeni state prevents the fulfillment of national responsibilities toward its citizens, while the weakness of neighboring countries limits regional capacity to respond. This creates a normative vacuum that elevates the Yemeni refugee issue to the level of international public interest. It also raises questions about the extent to which the international community is willing to intervene when both the country of origin and the host countries lack the institutional capacity to ensure the protection of displaced populations.

Despite recognition of the crisis, the international response to Yemeni displacement remains limited and fragmented. Several factors contribute to this weakness. First, humanitarian funding has consistently fallen short of projected needs, leaving the UN and partner agencies unable to provide comprehensive protection, services, and durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons. Unlike the Syrian crisis, where large-scale resettlement programs were implemented by multiple states, Yemeni refugees rarely benefit from organized resettlement initiatives or robust international legal safeguards. Second, the geopolitical landscape constrains international engagement: the involvement of regional powers, ongoing hostilities, and strategic interests in Yemen, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and surrounding areas reduce the willingness of states to intervene decisively or to prioritize refugee protection. Third, the nature of Yemeni migration, often framed as “irregular” or economic rather than strictly humanitarian, further diminishes the urgency of the response, as many international actors perceive Yemenis primarily as migrants rather than refugees entitled to formal protection. Finally, limited media coverage and global public attention have contributed to a perception that the crisis is of secondary importance, affecting both funding levels and political pressure on states to act. Collectively, these structural, political, and normative

factors produce a scenario in which the international community's capacity and willingness to protect Yemeni refugees are severely constrained, reinforcing the refugees' heightened vulnerability and elevating the issue to a matter of international concern.

Conclusion

This study has examined how the 2014 Yemeni Civil War has shaped regional and international migration dynamics. The conflict's initial local outbreak, followed by its internationalization in 2015, not only triggered large-scale internal displacement but also transformed Yemen into a central hub within broader migratory corridors. Yemeni migration patterns are characterized by a dual vulnerability: the collapse of state authority and the concentration of refugees in structurally fragile host states, including Somalia, Djibouti, and Ethiopia. These conditions have created multi-layered challenges in terms of legal protection, social integration, and humanitarian assistance, situating Yemeni refugees at the intersection of national collapse and regional instability.

The regionalization of the conflict, driven by the interventions of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran, has further intensified migration pressures and linked human mobility to broader geopolitical stakes in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. The combination of weak governance, limited institutional capacity in host countries, and insufficient international engagement has elevated the Yemeni refugee crisis to a matter of international public interest.

Beyond the immediate humanitarian consequences, Yemeni migration reflects deeper structural dysfunctions within the country and the region. State fragmentation, limited protection mechanisms, and inadequate regional preparedness exacerbate displacement vulnerabilities and prolong the crisis. The case of Yemen thus illustrates how internal conflicts, when compounded by regional dynamics, produce complex migration patterns that extend beyond national borders.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive, multilevel approach that integrates conflict resolution, strengthened regional cooperation, and targeted international policies to protect displaced populations. Future research should continue to monitor the long-term consequences of Yemeni displacement on regional stability, labor markets, and migration governance, while emphasizing the need for sustainable solutions to support refugees and host communities alike. Ultimately, the Yemeni case demonstrates the urgency of rethinking refugee protection within a context where conflict, fragility, and mobility are increasingly intertwined.

Bibliography

ACAPS. *Country Analysis: Djibouti.* 2023. https://www.acaps.org/en/countries/djibouti# (accessed November 9, 2025).

Ahmado, Nisan, Sahra Eidle Nur, and Hussein Aden. "Yemen Unrest Makes Somalia Unlikely Safe Haven for Refugees." *Voice of America News.* 2019. https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/yemen-unrest-makes-somalia-unlikely-safe-haven-refugees (accessed May 18, 2025).

Ahmed, Niaz. "Yemeni civil war: Causes, consequences and prospects." *JDP (Jurnal Dinamika Pemerintahan), vol. 2, no 2*, 2019: 82-91.

Al Basoos, Hani, and Buthaina Al Hinai. "Understanding the root causes of the conflict in Yemen." *Bussecon Review of Social Sciences, vol. 2, no 2*, 2020: 14-20.

Al Dosari, Abdullah, and Mary George. " Yemen war: An overview of the armed conflict and role of belligerents." *Journal of Politics and Law, vol. 13, no. 1*, 2020: 53-65.

Al-Akhali, Rafat. "The challenge of federalism in Yemen." *Bibliothèque universitaire Saxe-Anhalt*, 2014.

Ali, Morgann Barbara Pernot, et al. "What War Does to Yemeni Migration." *Arabian Humanities* , 2025.

Ali, Najaf, Anwar Ali, and Imran Khan. "External Factors in Yemen Crisis: A Critical Overview." *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 2023: 367-379.

Al-Madhaji, Majed, Asil Sidahmed, and Farea Al-Muslimi. "The roles of regional actors in Yemen and opportunities for peace." *Sanaa Policy Center Brief, vol. 1*, 2015: 3-8.

Al-Monitor. *Iran's angle in Yemen.* May 14, 2013. http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/iran-angle-yemen-relations.html# (accessed November 19, 2025).

Alshammari, Saad, and Daud Sity. "The Yemen Conflict's Ripple Effect: Saudi Arabia's Response and Regional Stability." *Migration Letters, vol. 20, no. S12*, 2023: 1292-1307.

Al-Tamimi, Adeb Abdulelah Abdulwahid, and Uddagatti Venkatesha. "Arab Spring in Yemen: causes and consequences." *Shodh Sarita, Vol 7, No 28*, 2020: 59-63.

Askarieh, Emad. *IFP News: Spokeswoman Rejects Yemeni FM's Claims against Iran.* May 4, 2014. https://ifpnews.com/spokeswoman-rejects-yemeni-fms-claims-iran/ (accessed November 21, 2025).

Asl, Seyedmohammad, et al. "Yemen Crisis after 2015: The Attitudes of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates." *Cuestiones Políticas, vol 39, no 69*, 2021.

Augustin, Anne-Linda Amira. "Chanting for Southern Independence." *Middle East Report, vol 273*, 2014: 11-13.

Brehony, Noel. " The current situation in Yemen: causes and consequences." *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, vol 6, no 11*, 2015.

Brehony, Noel. "War in Yemen: No end in sight as the state disintegrates." *Asian Affairs, vol. 51, no 3*, 2020: 510-527.

Carment, David, and Patrick. James. "Internal Constraints and Interstate Ethnic Conflict: Toward a Crisis-Based Assessment of Irredentism." *Journal of Conflict Resolution, Vol 39, No 1*, 1995.

Castagnone, Eleonora. "Transit migration: a piece of the complex mobility puzzle. The case of Senegalese migration." *Cahiers de l'Urmis, no 13*, 2011.

Chetail, Vincent. "Conceptualizing International Migration Law." In *Proceedings Of The One Hundred Tenth Annual Meeting Of The American Society Of International Law*, 201-201. 2017.

Chojnacki, Sven. "Anything new or more of the same? Wars and military interventions in the international system, 1946–2003." *Global Society, vol. 20, no 1*, 2006: 25-46.

Clausen, Maria-Louise. "Competing for control over the state: The case of Yemen." In *Rethinking statehood in the Middle East and north Africa*, 182-200. London: Routledge, 2020.

Clausen, Maria-Louise. "Understanding the crisis in Yemen: Evaluating competing narratives." *The International Spectator, Vol 50, No 3*, 2015: 16-29.

Coppi, Giulio. "The Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen: Beyond the Man-Made Disaster." *International Peace Institute*, 2018.

Cordesman, Anthony H. "War in Yemen: Hard Choices in a Hard War." *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 2022.

Day. "The Political Challenge of Yemen's Southern Movement." In *Yemen on the Brink*, by Christopher Boucek and Marina Ottaway, 70-84. Washington: Carnegie Endowment, 2010.

Day, Stephen. *Regionalism and rebellion in Yemen: A troubled national union.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Day, Stephen W., and Noel Brehony. *Global, regional, and local dynamics in the Yemen crisis.* Londres: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Domazeti, Riad. "Yemen Report: A People Seeking Peace under the Rubble of a Wrecked State." *Report INSAMER*, 2020.

F. Gresh, Geoffrey. "A vital maritime pinch point: China, the Bab al-Mandeb, and the Middle East." *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, vol. 11, no 1*, 2017: 37-46.

Falk, Richard A. "The legitimacy of legislative intervention by the United Nations." *Essays on intervention vol. 19, no 6*, 1964.

Grant, Stefanie. "An International Migration Protection Regime: The Current Situation, Dilemmas And Initiatives." *Istituto Per Glistudi Di Politicainternazionale (Ispi)*, 2006.

Guha-Sapir, Debarati, and Jideofor Thomas Ogbu. "Civil war and death in Yemen: Analysis of SMART survey and ACLED data, 2012–2019." *PLOS Global Public Health, vol. 2, no. 8*, 2022.

Gurr, Ted Robert,. *Why Men Rebel.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970.

Henderdon, Errol A., and J. David. Singer. "Civil war in the post-colonial world, 1946-92.,." *Journal of Peace research, vol. 37, no 3*, 2000: 275-299.

Hill, Ginny. *Yemen endures: Civil war, Saudi adventurism and the future of Arabia.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

International Organization for Migration. "Glossaire Sur La Migration. Droit International De La Migration No 34,." 2019.

International Organization for Migration. "Glossary on Migration. International Migration Law No. 34,." 2019.

—. "IOM Boosts Migrant Support, Urges Action AmidHumanitarian Crisis in Yemen." 2024. https://www.iom.int/news/iom-boosts-migrant-support-urges-action-amid-humanitarian-crisis-yemen (accessed November 9, 2025).

International Organization for Migration. "Measuring progress toward durable solutions in Yemen: Ta'iz governorate." 2025.

International Organization for Migration. "Report on Migration, Environment, and Climate Change in Yemen – Desk Review." 2023.

—. "Yemen Crisis Response Plan 2025." 2025. https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/yemen-crisis-response-plan-2025 (accessed May 24, 2025).

Jabbour, Ramy. "Yemen Conflict Analyzing the Requirement of a Potential Solution." 2018.

Kalyvas, Stathis N. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Lackner, Helen. "Saudi Arabia-Yemen Relations: A Long History of Mistrust." *OrientXXI*, 2022.

—. *Yemen in Crisis: Devastating Conflict, Fragile Hope.* Londres: Saqi Books, 2023.

Little, Richard. *Intervention: External Involvement in Civil Wars.* New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975.

Lott, Alexander. "Maritime Security Threats and the Passage Regime in the Bab el-Mandeb." 2021.

Luard, Evan. *The blunted sword: the erosion of military power in modern world politics.* London: IB Tauris & Colimited, 1988.

Macfarlane, Neil. *Intervention in contemporary world politics.* London: Routledge, 2013.

Manea, Elham. "The Geopolitics of the Yemeni Crisis." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Geopolitics.*, 1-21. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024.

Masoudi, Shirin, Mohammadali Abdollahzadeh, and Majid Saeedi. "The Impact Of The Yemeni Crisis On International Peace And Security." *Iranian Sociological Review, Vol. 11, No 4*, 2021: 73-83.

Middle East Monitor. *Sanaa is the fourth Arab capital to join the Iranian revolution.* September 27, 2014. https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140927-sanaa-is-the-fourth-arab-capital-to-join-the-iranian-revolution/ (accessed November 22, 2025).

Migrant and Refugee Section. "Migration profile: Yemen." 2021.

Miro-Herrans, Aida T., Ali Al-Meeri, and Connie J. Mulligan. "Human migration patterns in Yemen and implications for reconstructing prehistoric population movements." *Plos one, vol. 9, no 4*, 2014.

Odermatt, Jed. "Between Law and Reality: New Wars and Internationalised Armed Conflict." *Amsterdam LF, vol. 5*, 2013.

Park, Sungtae. "Fact Sheet: Yemen." *American Security Project*, 2022.

Pearson, Frederic S. "Geographic proximity and foreign military intervention." *Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 18, no 3*, 1974: 432-460.

Porter, Ross. "Freedom, power and the crisis of politics in revolutionary Yemen." *Middle East Critique, vol. 26, no 3*, 2017: 265-281.

Ragab, Eman. "Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE after the Arab Spring." *The International Spectator, vol 52, No 2*, 2017: 37-53.

Regan, Patrick M. "Choosing to intervene: Outside interventions in internal conflicts." *The Journal of Politics, Vol 60, No 3*, 1998: 754-779.

Roseneau, James. "Intervention as a scientific concept." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol 13, no 2* ., 1969.

Salmoni, Barak A., Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells. *Regime and periphery in Northern Yemen.* Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2010.

Schindlmayr, Thomas. "Sovereignty, Legal Regimes, And International Migration." *International Migration, Vol. 41, No 2*, 2003.

Schmitz, Charles, and Robert D Burrowes. *Historial Dictionnary of Yemen.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

Sharp, Jeremy M., and Ida A. Brudnick. "Yemen Civil War and regional intervention. " *Congressional Research service*, 2015.

Suhrke, Astri. "Burden-sharing during refugee emergencies: The logic of collective versus national action." *Journal of refugee studiesn vol 11, no 4*, 1998: 396-415.

Thiel, Tobias. "After the Arab Spring: power shift in the Middle East?: Yemen's Arab Spring: from youth revolution to fragile political transition." *IDEAS reports-special reports, London School of Economics and Political Science*, 2012.

Thiollet, Hélène. " Les flux migratoires au Yémen: enjeux sécuritaires, politiques et sociaux." *Research Report-Defense Ministry*, 2009.

Transfeld, Mareike. *Iran's Small Hand in Yemen, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.* February 14, 2017. http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/67988 (accessed November 24, 2025).

UNHCR. *Urgences en Somalie.* Juin 2022. https://www.unhcr.org/be/urgences/urgence-en-somalie (accessed Novembre 10, 2025).

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Fact sheet on Yemen, January-June 2024." 2024.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Needs mount as conflict in Yemen rages on." 2022.

—. "Yemen Humanitarian Crisis." 2025. https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/yemen/ (accessed May 19, 2025).

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and International Organization for Migration. "Yemen Situation: Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan, January–December 2016." 2015.

United Nations. "International Migration Report 2013:Chapter Iii – Legal Instruments On International Migration." 2013.

Von Einsiedel, Sebastian, et al. "Civil war trends and the changing nature of armed conflict." *Occasional paper, vol. 10*, 2017: 1-10.

Watol, Birhanu Sileshi. "The Post-2011 Yemen Internationalized Civil War: It's National, Regional And Global Implications." *European Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol. 1, No 4*, 2024: 3-25.

Zweiri, Mahjoob. "Iran and political dynamism in the Arab world: The case of Yemen." *Digest of Middle East Studies, vol. 25, no 1*, 2016: 4-18.